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IGNITING HEARTS & MINDS

The Luminescence of Trinity

Consecrating Nightmare at the Center of a Sacred World

Kay Whitlock



A fireball begins to rise, and the world's first atomic mushroom cloud begins to form, nine seconds after Trinity detonated on July 16, 1945. Photo credit: US Department of Defense.

She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power
*—from the poem “Power,” by Adrienne Rich,
occasioned by reflection on Marie Curie, who conducted pioneering research into radioactivity
and the isolation of radium*

IN THE AUTUMN OF 2017, my partner and I joined a long car caravan winding slowly across White Sands Missile Range. Organized semiannually by the Alamogordo, New Mexico Chamber of Commerce, the trek set out from an empty lot adjacent to the local high school’s athletic fields.

[Journey’s end](#), Trinity Site, is where the first atomic bomb—scientists and officials working on the device called it “the gadget”—exploded at 5:29 a.m. on 16 June 1945. It is open to the public only two days each year, the first Saturdays in April and October.

That I finally made the trip still surprises me, though I have long been an avid student of [the history of The Bomb](#) and its human, ecological, political, and cultural impacts. I’d always intended to visit Trinity Site at some vague moment in the future. But it’s the kind of destination that self-generates a continuous avalanche of even better reasons for not going. For decades, each time I contemplated the journey, I just as quickly abandoned the idea.

That may have something to do with the engraved metal dog tag I wore on a chain around my neck many years ago. Along with other grade school children in my home town, my sister and I were physically tagged as potential nuclear war casualties. These tags, stamped with our names, addresses, and phone numbers, also bore a P for Protestant, C for Catholic, or J for Jewish. My mother wrote our blood types on the back in nail polish. In this way, The Authorities could identify young dazed, scorched, irradiated survivors of nuclear blasts or our sad little corpses—assuming that the IDs and human detritus were not completely vaporized.



The school district and my parents thought the dog tags, evoking those identifying military war casualties, were a good [Civil Defense](#) measure in the [post-Atomic, Cold War era](#). I don't recall whether they were mandatory, but the purpose was clear. We ducked under desks, covering our heads with our arms, during school safety drills (today's version are school lockdowns). No one I knew could afford a real fallout shelter, but along with countless other mothers all over America, my mom amassed canned goods, bottles of Coca-Cola, and flashlight batteries in the basement. As the catechism of the nuclear age might have it, these were “outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual terror.”

While cleaning the house following my mother's death many years later, I found a dozen cans of Dinty Moore beef stew still stashed away. They either bulged or, through explosive rites of transubstantiation, had already burst into puddles of gelatinous, purple goo covering the shelves.

I often wonder: beyond the usual reductive political and religious pronouncements, what *is* there to say about the character of a society that seeks its own life and light through the ability to control, dominate, devastate, destroy? About a society that claims this life and light by framing such power as exceptional, inevitable, moral, and sacrosanct?

These questions stalk all of my work about structural violence, sometimes obliquely. This violence—ranging from policing and prisons to genocide to gender violence to laying waste entire ecosystems—can't ever be effectively addressed as a series of separate, single “issues.”

I am speaking here of routine forms of massive violence, enabled and carried out legally and often with significant popular support, by respectable people in public and private institutions. These are structural components of everyday normalcy. Nothing exists in isolation; race, economics, gender, disability, culture, and ecological disruptions are always dynamically interrelated, always shaping one another and the larger social reality. But when public opinion begins to

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raise some uncomfortable questions, it is almost always within the narrow confines of mild tasking presented as, “Well, the basic intention is right, and it started out OK. They’ve just gone a little too far.” That mindset ushers us into the delusional task of measurement: how much routine violence is too massive, and how much is just right.

This is deranged territory, where any deal cut, however understandably, only reifies the foundations of structural violence by yielding to its terms of debate. Accordingly, I have abandoned the search for reasonable answers to any of my questions. Now I look more for clues, trail markers, symbols, and fragments that hint at something much . . . well, *larger*.

That’s probably why I finally showed up at Trinity Site, in search of *larger*.

Part I: Rites, Ritual, and Celebration

“Gotta light?”

—[The Woodsman, Part 8, *Twin Peaks: The Return*](#)

By *larger*, I mean: my usual interpretations are no longer sufficient for comprehending, much less responding to, the titanic reach and intricate influence of structural violence. That is to say, the violence of coercion, conquest, colonization, exploitation, limitless extraction, poverty, privatizing what must be collectively held in order to ensure collective well-being, the expansion of the carceral state, and endless war. The quest for *larger* bolsters my willingness to engage complexity; to simultaneously, and without apology, engage mind, heart, and spirit—without feeling obliged to be polite about it.

With regard to the lethal legacies of Trinity, it matters that acculturation to the atomic age was never focused on doom and gloom. It was also, in part, heady and humorous; thrilling and

suspenseful; filled with celebrity endorsement. [Earlier expressions of concern and protests](#) from scientists who’d worked on developing the atom bomb—and then argued against its deployment—had been squashed. In the aftermath of bombing of [Hiroshima](#) and [Nagasaki](#), any number of philosophers, scholars, physicians, scientists, and artists cried out against the inhumanity and warned of future dangers. But politics and popular culture framed such concerns as unpatriotic and rendered them largely invisible. [Endless Civil Defense public service announcements](#) on radio and television broadcast a whiff of upbeat determination and normalcy along with alarming, mostly useless, dollops of information (“When you see the flash, cover your eyes!”). Popular culture was replete with [songs](#) filled with [braggadocio and defiance](#), neon signs, menu items, and knick-knacks related to the Atomic Bomb. [Post-World War II tests](#) in the Pacific and in the Nevada desert—the US alone conducted at least 1054 of them between 1945 and 1992—came with [false assurances](#) that there would be no lasting danger to those in the area or [downwind of the tests](#). The problem of [nuclear waste disposal](#) would only emerge as a public concern further down the road—and, in the Trump years, become a small feature in a much larger (and fraudulent) [politics of austerity](#). The atmosphere in those days was replete with a [grotesque blend](#) of existential anxiety tempered by American atomic triumphalism. We embarked on a [never-ending journey](#) into [the Twilight Zone](#), most of it fed by a steady drumbeat of [Red Scare propaganda](#).

[Public doubts emerged](#), along with some laudable [Ban the Bomb](#) activism in Europe and the US, but the optimism of supremacist vision won, as it usually does. After all, who wants to believe the worst? It’s so depressing. Better to file the jagged edges off reality. Problems, actual and potential, are brushed away by pretending that, through the intervention of “experts,” every terrible thing is manageable and survivable, at least for those who (by the raced/classed/gendered calculus of worthiness) really matter. But that’s the simple part. The more exhilarating challenge

is to make the crusade holy; to create images, rites, rituals, spectacles, and ceremonies intended to bind the dominant segments of a nation together, across generations, through the twinned rubrics of survival and supremacy.

Throughout the country from the late 1940s into the early 1960s, buttressed by a [white-washed storyline](#) about the 1962 “Cuban missile crisis,” civic officials and families were drafted into a series of absurd, often short-lived, survival schemes. A member of my extended family told me that as a young mother living outside of New York City, she was instructed to send her two young sons to school draped in white sheets, with a hole in the center cut out for their heads. These coverings would, she was told, help deflect the heat of a nuclear blast as children walked to and from home. To her credit, this young mother, the very antithesis of a political radical, responded to school authorities with a blistering refusal.

It was the perfect American metaphor. Send (primarily) white kids to school dressed in white sheets for safety’s sake.

So, my avoidance of Trinity site is, I hope, understandable. Yet I have often experienced synchronicity, the idea of meaningful coincidences, and in the end, this was the deciding factor. Something in the material world coincides with a person’s state of mind, conscious or unconscious, in some personally significant way. You know how it goes: you’ve been thinking of someone you haven’t seen or talked to for years and, quite unexpectedly, that person calls you or writes or news about them suddenly appears. Or you’ve been avoiding thinking about Trinity site this year because it’s too twisted a destination, and *blam*. I generally regard synchronicity as a nudge—sometimes a painful kick in the ass—to pay attention to something I’m not seeing clearly enough.

Blam began early in 2017 with a deluge of images and popular culture depictions of Trinity and its legacies. Especially [the brilliant and unnerving](#) Part 8 of “Twin Peaks: The Return,” with

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its evocation of the test—a power source unleashing forces of unimaginable evil—set against the musical backdrop of Krzysztof Penderecki’s [“Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima.”](#)

Two friends, also visited by thoughts and shadows of Trinity, introduced me to unexpected [books](#) I’d never heard of, [more books](#), [poetry](#), and two mesmerizing (and moderately steamy) seasons of a [critically acclaimed fictional TV series](#) set in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where a critical mass of scientists gathered under the expansive umbrella of The Manhattan Project to create The Bomb.

Around this time, the news was stalked by specters of things nuclear, the progeny of Trinity. [Fukushima radiation and the Tokyo 2020 Olympics](#). The [appalling reality](#) that [Donald Trump was in charge](#) of US nuclear policy. The staggering power of [today’s nuclear weapons](#). [Uranium mining](#), with its deep connection to [environmental racism](#). The possibility, later confirmed, of [plutonium thefts](#). The [geopolitics of nuclear energy and weaponry](#). Grandiose nuclear contamination [containment schemes](#). Nuclear power’s [seductive, false promises](#).

How much synchronicity does it take to make a dent in my personal stockpile of avoidance? A sledgehammer’s worth, apparently. But finally, over a long weekend in early October, my partner and I found our way first to [109 East Palace](#) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where Manhattan Project scientists and workers reported for duty, then to [Los Alamos](#), and finally to [Trinity Site](#). All celebrations of a relentless “can do!” stampede of technological know-how and American triumphalism.

Contrary to popular assertion, dropping the bomb was [not necessary](#) to defeat Japan in World War II. But once the atomic bomb was created, the compulsion to use it was all but inevitable. While at this writing, the US is still the only nation to have deployed nuclear weapons against

another nation, American nuclear fear is focused on the terror that somebody else might do to “us” what “we” already did to “them.”

The American solution to the problem of truth is to organize around a false and contradictory but compelling binary: the US is omnipotent and superior, even while the US is also an unjustly persecuted victim under constant assault by hostile forces who “hate us for our freedoms.” The only way to successfully manage both ends of the binary is with overwhelming force. Dominate. Devastate. Demolish. Destroy.

Part II: War, Remembrance, and Erasure

August 8, 1945

Dear Folks,

We have been getting all this atomic bomb dope today and yesterday. I don't know what to think. If only a third of this dope is factual it revolutionizes the whole world; necessitating a complete new set of ideas . . . If this is a fact the war is over, I am coming home, but the whole idea scares me. I guess the first thought that flashes thru anyone's mind is what is going to happen in the future when two nations go to war with this equipment . . .

—from a letter written by my partner's father, then a young naval officer serving aboard a minesweeper in the Pacific

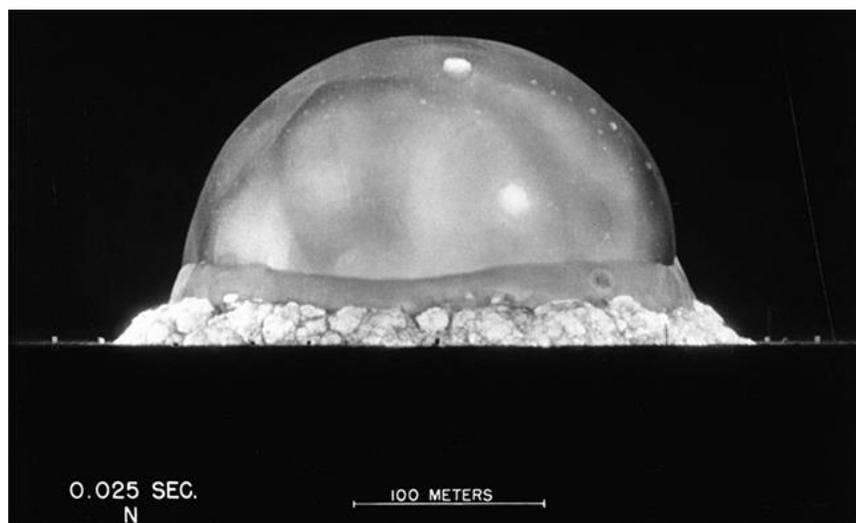
I am often drawn to historical battlefields and sites by a sense that the memories, the ghosts, the landscape will somehow reveal more than I have yet learned through book-and-documentary-related study. And by the inchoate sense that I may even be changed by it, that in mysterious ways, my justice vision will be moved toward greater wholeness. In solitary reflection in places where something terrible happened, I listen to the land, to winds, to the rustle of leaves. I cull histories, photographs, poetry, and survivor accounts to try to conjure in my imagination the people and the

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place and the moment. And sometimes something close to that happens, a quiet ripple in time and perception that somehow shifts how I see and experience everything. When I lived in southern Colorado, long before a [national historic site](#) was created, I periodically drove out east to Sand Creek, where a long-ago cavalry massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples—mostly women, children, and elderly people—took place. There, I sat alone for hours and in silence on land unmarked by buildings or pathways. For whatever reason, [Shiloh](#) still disquiets me in a way many other historic battlegrounds do not.

Perhaps Trinity Site, part of a vast, desert landscape, with blue mountains off in the distance, had metamorphosed into that, an elegiac lamentation murmured by earth and sky.

[First-hand witnesses](#) to the Trinity test use vivid words to describe what they felt, heard, and saw as this new force, capable of annihilation on a global scale, was released: “breathtaking,” “awe,” “grandeur,” “fantastic.” They reported that the flash of light came first. Then, as Val Fitch, an enlisted man with the Army’s Special Engineer Detachment noted, “It took the blast wave about 30 seconds. There was the initial loud report, the sharp gust of wind, and then the long period of reverberation as the sound waves echoed off the nearby mountains and came back to us.”



*The expanding fireball and shockwave of the Trinity explosion, seen .025 seconds after detonation on July 16, 1945.
Photo credit: US Department of Defense.*

I imagined the memory of that sound would yet be echoing; that the ground would still tremble, at least in my heart. But the ghosts had fled. We were greeted on arrival by imposing banks of port-a-potties and a few scattered tables where friendly local people behind gas grills offered hot dogs and hamburgers for purchase.

From there, it was a quarter-mile’s walk to Ground Zero, marked by a stone obelisk erected long after the test, and surrounded by a tall chain link fence. Along the pathway, cheerful people at a mobile souvenir stand sold commemorative mushroom cloud t-shirts, pins, and other ephemera. The clicking of Geiger counters on display tables confirmed the still-radioactive nature of [trinitite](#), a greenish, glasslike substance of fused sand and other particles created by the intense heat and force of the first atomic blast.

If Trinity Site is a shrine, trinitite is its sacred relic. Collectors have acquired a lot of the stuff—allegedly before its taking was banned in 1952—and we saw scattered bits of it on the ground, though most has been buried. While visitors are assured that no health risk is posed by its presence, signs warn that taking trinitite is theft of government property. But we saw teenagers scrounging for some in the dirt. On the way out, just the other side of Stallion Gate, we encountered many weekend vendors hawking chunks of trinitite for sale out of their cars and trucks.

A series of large Manhattan Project-related photographs is displayed along a northern segment of the Ground Zero fence. Save for the photo of the Trinity Site Polo Team, these are iconic images of the bomb and the buildup to the test, long familiar in bomb lore. There are no photographs of the [devastation to the peoples and landscapes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#).

Courtesy buses took us a short distance out to the [McDonald ranch house](#)—the Army seized the house from a local family under protest in 1942 and never returned it—where final assembly of the active plutonium core for “the gadget” took place before the completed bomb was

transported to the test tower. Because there are so few “things” to actually see at the site, people flocked to an empty room to take selfies under a single lightbulb dangling on a cord from the ceiling with a sign marking the space as “Plutonium Assembly Room.”

Of the few hundred people we saw at Trinity Site, more than a few were Japanese Americans and visitors from Japan. There were also many young men, predominantly white, who had served in Iraq or Afghanistan and were accompanied by buddies, wives, and girlfriends. They made jokes about The Bomb, but the laughter that greeted them was short-lived and uncomfortable, a series of staccato barks. Some people, not many, brought their kids who seemed bored. Others, like us, were in their sixties and older; many of these men wore hats or other indicators of their status as veterans of earlier wars and eras. Mostly, there was silence, which did not seem so much reverent or contemplative as baffled: *What the hell?*



Trinity Site. Photo credit: Kay Whitlock

Whatever anyone was looking for, I doubt that they found it.

All this is to say: Trinity Site is [a monument of erasure](#). A memorial offering only the assertion that something awesome took place here, and that Americans did it. And by “erasure,” I don’t mean what many people consider the emptiness of a desert landscape. I grew up on a short-grass prairie. It has always been the arroyos, the deserts, the tablelands and plateaus, the spare places where movement always seems to happen only at the corner of vision that most stir my soul.

No, this void is intentional. Crafted entirely by humans, it is something akin to a hidden entombment. Buried somewhere deep beneath the assertion of magnificent accomplishment is something no one is supposed to notice.

Part III: Sacrifice

But Mr. F was wrong yesterday when he said that this country is so old it did not matter what we Anglos do here. What we do anywhere matters, but especially here. It matters very much. Mesas and mountains, rivers and trees, winds and rain are as sensitive to the actions and thoughts of humans as we are to their forces. They take into themselves what we give off, and give it out again.

—*Edith Warner, journal entry, June 24, 1933, [In the Shadow of Los Alamos](#)*

At an unmarked place along the roadside on the way to Los Alamos, at the edge of lands belonging to the San Ildefonso Pueblo, stand the remains of a small adobe tearoom/café run by Edith Warner and her friend and companion Tilano, a pueblo elder. Once open to the public, the government permitted the teahouse to remain open during the intense Manhattan Project years solely for the purpose of providing refreshments and brief respite to [Robert Oppenheimer](#), the

theoretical physicist who led the A-bomb development effort, Niels Bohr, and other atomic scientists and their wives.

One overcast and rain-swept morning, my partner and I drove to Los Alamos. On our way, following the careful directions provided by a friend, and without encroaching upon San Ildefonso lands, we stopped near a small turnout and walked back to look at the remnants of small buildings where Warner lived and worked. [Peggy Pond Church](#), who knew Warner and Tilano, notes that the lives of tearoom visitors were all heavily-surveilled, filled with tension, and circumscribed by stringent restrictions and security measures. Accordingly, she writes, “there were many people at Los Alamos who felt that only their evenings at Edith Warner’s kept them human.”

Warner’s story deserves to be encountered on its own terms, especially in her own writings and journals, most of which were published after her death. Although she did not know any details until after the Trinity test, she almost certainly sensed and feared a terrible weapon in the making. Yet she did not hate the scientists. Nor did she justify their work, nor did she comfort herself by simplifying in her mind the magnitude or violence of what was being created. Instead, rooted in the love of earth, water, and sky, and recognizing the ultimate importance of respectful, compassionate, evolving relationship—to people and all beings as well as to the earth—she saw more deeply, and with clearer vision, what this all meant. Hers was not an activist vision, but nonetheless it quietly subverts supremacist notions by refusing to see human beings as somehow separate from or in dominant relation to nature. Rooted in [Indigenous understandings](#), it recognizes well-being can only result from just, respectful, and non-destructive relationship in many intersecting realms.

This is where—along the road, near a crumbling adobe teahouse, in that particular New Mexico landscape that includes the San Ildefonso Pueblo, and in the writings of Warner—I finally

caught a sentient glimpse of *larger* in relation to Trinity. A powerfully sensate inkling of wholeness, or at least something closer to it, that goes far beyond daylight recognition. And that’s when I began to recognize the luminescence of Trinity for what it really is: part of a murder-suicide pact on a global scale. I didn’t agree to this pact—though [new generations of cheerleaders](#) cling to the dream of the technological fix—and neither did most of you.

The luminescence of Trinity touches everything; it has since the first test, and it continues to touch lives and ecologies, mostly in ways that are harmful, not immediately visible, forgotten, and ignored. And it violates every possible, sane understanding of “right relationship.” *The same is true for all structural forms of violence.*

For the most part, political perceptions and discourse are so fragmented, so hopelessly rent, not only in the mainstream, but along the liberal/progressive/left spectrum. I know that transformative change is fought for, and begins to arrive, in bits and pieces; in fits and starts. But our animating analyses and visions should never be piecemeal.

Mainstream political and economic conversation depend on disassociation as an organizing principle of dialogue, policy, platform. There is a civic habit, deeply engrained, of never addressing [wholeness and the kinship of human and other sentient beings](#). It could be done. Not by ignoring the constituent parts of structural violence—white supremacy, economic violence, gender violence, ecological devastation, genocide, [mass extinction](#)—but by addressing them specifically *and with regard to the dynamic relationships among them*. Yet many of us say that is impossible because “it’s too overwhelming,” or “we’ll lose focus.” Often: “we’ll lose our funding.”

But what is the cost of voluntarily spinning endlessly in the lethal centrifuge of cosmetic change and fatalism created by accepting existing terms of debate? It’s time to establish new ones; to work as hard to shift consciousness as we do policy. Groundbreaking efforts by [abolitionists](#)

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and [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) to shift both consciousness and priorities already provide some heartening models for thinking differently. Others will emerge. The alternative is to let fear, rage, and failure of imagination triumph.

Structural violence is not “inevitable,” nor is it “necessary.” Its varied forms constitute a series of interrelated murder-suicide pacts organized by dominant power hierarchies around the rhetoric and practices of supremacy, survival, and security. These pacts are then invested with a quasi-holy status. But it is a shabby holiness, and phony, manufactured at the bipartisan crossroads of greed and an unquenchable thirst for domination.

Eventually, these pacts will take us all down—peoples, other sentient beings, cultures, ecologies, smaller caring economies—but some have long been going down first and hardest, in alignment with the dictates of [racial capitalism](#) which require never-ending blood sacrifice. The geographer and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore has defined racism as [“state-sanctioned or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”](#) And this group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death is not only raced but classed, gendered, and overtly or covertly [eugenic](#) to the end.

Better to name and publicly withdraw consent to these unwritten pacts. Better to expose and discard the consecration of nightmare. Better to go *larger*.



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